

The Timer Effect

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ABSTRACT

Time can influence human behavior whether we notice or not. This article describes a study conducted to investigate whether visual access to a timer can influence students' participation during class discussions. Even if we do not think of time as a pressure factor in language teaching, it can serve as an external pressure to make students produce the language faster and more naturally. By giving students a time limit to accomplish a task, they have to figure out a way how to accomplish it. In this case, the students' task was to have a well-balanced discussion in a group of four, where all of the students have an equal opportunity to share their ideas and listen to each other's opinions.

INTRODUCTION

One of the main things about EDC classes is that the teachers and students only have a certain amount of time to accomplish the goals of the lesson and to have a full 16 minute discussion about different topics. To make sure the students have enough time to accomplish this main goal, a timer is used to moderate most of the class activities. As Serrano (2011) mentioned in her study, practicing one thing for a certain amount of time can help the students focus on the specific part of language they are learning. For these discussion classes, the main activity for the students is to complete a 16 minute discussion. I had the opportunity to observe some of my colleges and noticed that some of them have a large timer that lets the students see how much time they had left in their discussions. I, on the other hand, did not show my students a timer. I wanted the students to only think about the topic, rather than thinking about how much time they had left during discussions. This gave me the idea and the interest to investigate whether having a visual reminder of time would influence the students' behavior or participation during class discussions.

The main question that I wanted to answer was: Does the visual restriction of time influence the students' abilities during discussions? I wanted the students to be aware of their actions in class, not only to participate and speak in English, but also to keep in mind their use of the functions studied in class. I wanted the students to be able to evaluate their own performance and pay attention to other group members as well. According to Bertoldi, Kollar and Richard (1988), by identifying their own patterns the students can identify their strengths and weaknesses. Now, my question was whether students would be more able to moderate themselves in the specific time limit of 16 minutes? During previous classes, I have used both methods of having the timer visible to the students and not having it visible. I noticed subtle changes but always thought it was specific to a particular group. In this study I wanted to see if the effects of having access to a timer were generally specific across all groups or whether the effects may depend on the individual group.

For this study I chose to focus on the number of turns taken by each student and the length of the students' responses during the 16 minute discussion. Did the visual reminder of time make the students more aware of their speaking time? Did the quiet students speak more because they knew they had to share their ideas in a limited amount of time? Did having a reminder of the remaining time make the discussions more balanced, or did it fail to have any effect on the discussions at all?

METHOD

The method I chose to explore the time factor was to record discussions and observe students' behavior. I did this by selecting 3 groups of 8 students and dividing these groups into 6 smaller discussion groups. The discussions were recorded over a two week period of classes. Students had two full 16 minute discussions, one where they were able to see a timer and one where they were not. In the situation of not having a timer, the students had to predict how long they had been talking and how much time they had remaining. The students chosen were from groups that maximized the use of the function phrases in every class and that were generally very active during discussions. For these groups, discussions were more natural and they had very good group relationships, which made it more comfortable for them to tell each other if someone was speaking too much or to ask a question to someone who had not spoken. The general topic for both weeks was related to media, and all of the groups answered the same discussion questions.

I focused on the number of students' turns and how much time they were speaking during the discussions. In other words, how long did they speak and how many turns did they take during each discussion? Next, I compared the results from the discussions with and without timers. I also observed some of their behaviors during the discussions, such as if the students paid any attention to the timer, and if so, how they would look at it.

Data was collected over two weeks, during which Group A had no timer on week one and could see a timer during week two. Group B completed their discussions under the opposite conditions. During both weeks, Group C had one group with a timer on their table, and the other table with no timer. The two Group C students switched roles on week two. That way, I could observe and compare their physical behaviors side by side. Before the start of every discussion, all students were given specific instructions on what they needed to focus on in each discussion. For example, which target function phrases to use, and reminders to ask questions and stay on topic. All of the classes had 16 minutes discussion for both of the two weeks. Finally, I listened to their discussions and calculated the number of turns, the amount of time spoken, and the amount of pausing during the discussions.

Table 1: *Distribution of Timer*

	Week 1	Week 2
Group A	No timer	Timer
Group B	Timer	No timer
Group C	One group with timer / one group with no timer	One group with timer / one group with no timer

While there are several definitions for turns used in research, for this study, a full turn was considered as one person sharing their opinions. If any questions that were directly related to that idea were asked by other students, they were included in the turn and not counted separately. Only when a turn had clearly ended, did I measure the pausing before the next turn. I tried to keep the groups the same for the two weeks during final discussions, in order to have almost the same environment for both weeks. The same timer and questions were used with all of the groups.

RESULTS

Let us start with some examples from in-class observations, taken during the collection of data, where I noticed some general behavior patterns in different student groups. During weeks when the students had the opportunity to look at the timer, they would constantly look at it and point

out how much time they had left. They also asked more questions to students who were not speaking to make sure they had some time to speak. Students were also more aware of the use of the function phrases and that they had to use them in this particular amount of time. They did this by reminding each other to use them, either by using them themselves on the listener side by asking questions, or pointing them out in the book. When the students did not have the access to the timer reminding each other to use the phrases happened less frequently.

In Table 2 below, are some additional differences in the students' behavior when they had their discussions with and without the timer. Most of the differences were consistent with all groups.

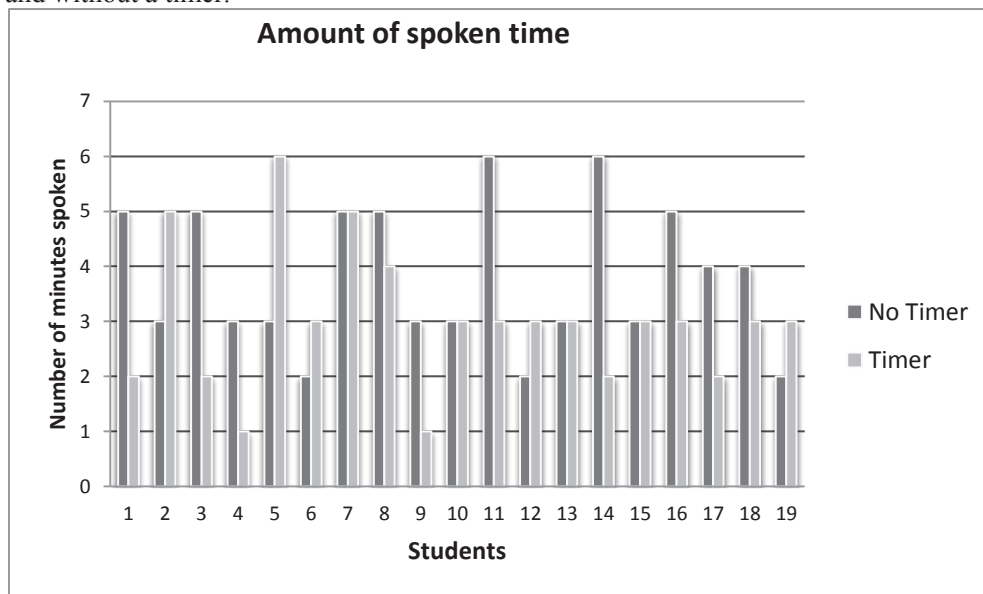
Table 2: *Physical Behaviors of the Students During Discussions*

Without Timer	With Timer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students continued the discussions for the full 16 minutes. If they spoke about all of questions in the book, they asked their own topic-related questions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students ended their discussions early if they had answered all of the questions and had one minute or less to go.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quiet students were not asked as often to speak as the more active students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The more active students made sure the quiet students had time to speak.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students were not aware if they used the function phrases learned in class or not. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students were more aware of their use of the function, and even reminded each other to use them.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students moved in and out of topic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students stayed focused and on topic.

When we look at the results, when the students had access to the timer (see Figure 1 below), we can see that there is more consistency in the amount of time each student spoke, as the discussions were a little more evenly balanced. The students have a 16 minute discussion which means each student has about 4 minutes of speaking time. With the presence of the timer the students were aware of this. The discussions were a little more consistent and closer to the class goal of 4 minutes per student. When they could not see the timer, some students spoke a lot more than the others. We can see the differences of students from one week to another. Some students that spoke too much one week, spoke less when they had the timer to look at and vice versa. We can clearly see that the students monitored themselves to fit the time goal of the class.

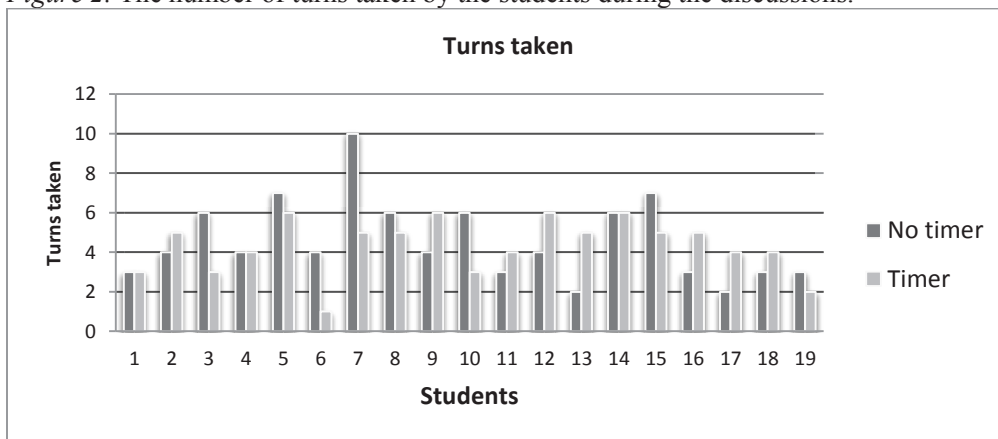
When we look at the amount of turns each student took during the discussions, we notice the following pattern. The students took more turns during the discussions when they had no timer. As mentioned above, when the students did not have a timer they continued speaking to the very end of the 16 minutes and asked more questions, resulting in more turn taking. However, some students did the opposite: there were many silent periods during their discussion when they did not have the timer. We can also see that the turns taken by the students are more balanced when they have a timer. When the students had the timer visible to them, they tried their best to fill in the time, whereas when the timer was not present, they took more time to think about what to say. When the students did not have a timer, they moved off topic easily but when they could see the remaining time, the discussions stayed on topic and the students asked more specific questions about the topics.

Figure 1. Representing the amount of time students spoke during the discussions with and without a timer.



When looking at both results together we can see that some students had fewer turns when they used the timer as a group but they also spoke longer periods of time for each turn, creating a more even participation with all of the students during the discussions.

Figure 2. The number of turns taken by the students during the discussions.



CONCLUSION

To my surprise, there were many benefits of giving students visual access to a timer. The students tended not only to have a more balanced discussion, but also achieved the class goals of using the function phrases learned that day and asking more questions during the given time. The results of this study show that even though many teachers may not think time is a factor in speaking classes, it can beneficially influence student behavior. By having the timer present, the students were more aware of their actions and the actions of others. Not only did the timer help

with the distribution of turns, but it also helped the students monitor themselves and ask more questions to the quieter students. These students also did a good job in making sure that everyone had a chance to say something before time was up. When they did not have the timer present, the students felt they had much more time to complete the discussion questions.

The inconvenience about having a timer is that students do not produce as many questions as they would when they think they have more time left. The advantage is that when they did ask questions they were more relevant to the topic and that helped to develop the discussion. Depending on what the focus is that for a particular week, I suggest that teachers alternate between giving the students visual access to a timer and keeping it hidden from them. Of course, other factors can also influence students participation during class, such as their health or if they had a test for another class the same day and are feeling too much pressure. These things can further affect the students in both the amount of time they speak and the turns they take during the discussions. As a teacher in this discussion classes all I can ask from my students is to help each other and try to continue these discussions. I can see now that having the students see the timer in front of them can help them speak even just a little bit if they are feeling these external pressures.

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